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THE QUEEN OF SHEBA.

THE Biblical story of the Queen of Sheba, thanks to its romantic character, has had a noteworthy career. It was embellished by post-biblical Jewish writers with a vast amount of fanciful detail. From Jews in North Arabia it passed to the Arabs, and is used by Mohammed in the Koran; in South Arabia, likewise, Arabs received it from Jews and carried it across the Red Sea into Abessinia, and learned historiographers traced the lineage of the royal family of Abessinia to the famous queen. She became and is still a name for all that is magnificent and intelligently curious.

According to the narrative (1 Kings x, 2 Chron. ix), the Queen, having heard of Solomon's wisdom, comes to Jerusalem in great state, with spices, gold, and precious stones, to test him; she plies him with hard questions concerning everything that interested her, and receives satisfactory answers — there was no problem that Solomon was not able to solve. Further, he shows her his palace and his household arrangements, including the fine bearing and splendid dress of his attendants, with the result that she is lost in admiration of his riches and wisdom: "Happy," she exclaims, "are those who serve you and hear your wisdom, and blessed be your God who has bestowed on you such excellence and happiness!" Then, after the usual exchange of presents between the two sovereigns, she goes back to her own land, and we hear no more of her in the Old Testament.

This story cannot be taken as historical. The "Sheba" meant, as is evident from the presents brought by the queen, is the famous region in southwest Arabia, later known as Yemen, "the South;" the Arabic name (*yaman*) by confusion with a similar word (*yamin*) was understood to mean "fortunate," and the consequent Roman designation, Arabia Felix, has become a part of our geographical nomenclature.¹ Though the early history of this region is not known to us, it is not improbable that a kingdom of Sheba (the native name is Saba) existed as early as the times of Solomon (middle of the tenth century B. C.). But it is not probable that the Israelites were acquainted with the Sabeian land in Solomon's time. The other mentions of Sheba in the Old Testament² all belong in the period after the capture of Jerusalem by the

¹ So Milton, *Paradise Lost*, iv, 159-163: —

As when to them who sail
Beyond the Cape of Hope, and now are passed
Mozambic, off at sea northeast winds blow
Sabæan odours from the spicy shore
Of Araby the bless'd.

² Ezek. xxvii, 22 f., xxxviii, 13; Isa. lx, 6; Jer. vi, 20; Job i, 15, vi, 19; Ps. lxxii, 10, 15; Joel iii, 8.

Chaldeans (586 B. C.), when the Jews came into possession of Babylonian geographical learning. The story in Kings is a part of the idealizing legendary matter that gathered about Solomon's name. Doubtless he had a reputation in his day for some sort of wisdom, as David in his day was esteemed as a poet; but David became in the tradition the ideal religious poet, and Solomon the ideal sage. He is said to have composed 3000 proverbs and 1005 songs, and to have spoken of all plants and animals — of which literary activity no trace has come to us. The exuberance of the legend appears in the statement (1 Kgs. iv, 34, in the English Version) that visitors from all peoples and all kings of the earth came to him to hear his wisdom — a form of statement that betrays the late date when the Jews came into contact with a great number of nations. The visit of the Queen of Sheba is a particular illustration of the general statement; Sheba is chosen as a far-off and famous land. She is herself a sage or a student, troubled by difficulties, and she seeks a great man to solve her problem, just as, long afterwards, wandering scholars, in the absence of books, sought learned men everywhere as teachers;¹ but this reflective attitude is not in accord with what we may surmise to have been the state of culture in Sheba and in Israel in the tenth century B. C.

The story is not the less interesting for being legendary. If, as seems probable, it arose in the sixth or the fifth century B. C., when Sheba became prominent in the Old Testament, we may infer that at that time Solomon was thought of mainly as a splendid and practically wise king, and had not attained the reputation assigned him by the authors and editors of Proverbs, the Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. It is noteworthy, also, that the custom of asking "hard questions" existed at that time. Unfortunately the story does not tell what these questions were, and this lack the fancy of later writers undertook to supply. Among the literary productions of the post-biblical Jews are certain paraphrases of Biblical books (Targums) and commentaries (Midrash) abounding in anecdotes, queer conceits, and all sorts of gossip. Much of this material may have been the product of familiar talks by teachers to their pupils, which sometimes ran into story-telling not unlike that of the Moslem *rawis*, to which we owe a good deal of the matter of the "Thousand and One Nights." These books have preserved a great mass of popular Jewish beliefs and fancies, parallel to certain opinions and beliefs found in the early Christian writers, and such beliefs come under the head of folk-lore, according to the wider definition sometimes given that term. In the Midrash or commentary on Proverbs, in the treatment of the first verse, there is a short list of the Queen of Sheba's questions. The writer quotes the words ascribed to Job (Job xxviii, 12): "Where shall wisdom be found?" and remarks that they refer to the

¹ See Eccclus. ch. xxxix.

Queen of Sheba, who came to Solomon to test him with riddles. "If I ask you a question," said she, "will you answer it?" He replied: "The Eternal gives wisdom" (Prov. ii, 6). Her first riddle: Seven go out, nine come in, two pour, and one drinks. He answers: Seven days of separation (after the menses) between man and wife, nine months of pregnancy, two breasts, and one (babe) that drinks. The second riddle: A mother says to her son: Your father is my father, your grandfather is my husband, you are my son, and I am your sister. The mother is Lot's daughter (Gen. xix, 30-38). The Queen then applies two other tests. She sends for persons of both sexes, dressed alike and looking alike, and asks the king to distinguish the males from the females. He has nuts and parched grain brought and distributed — the males take them in their outer garments (which they have to raise), the females, more modest, in their cloaks. She then requires him to distinguish between circumcised and uncircumcised persons; he orders the chief priest to bring the ark: the circumcised bowed only half the body, and their faces shone with the glory of the divine Presence, the uncircumcised, like Balaam (Num. xxiv, 16), fell on their faces to the ground. The two riddles and the first test are of the nature of popular jokes; the second test sets forth an academic exaggeration.

The book of Esther, though it makes no reference to religion, was a favorite among the Jews because it describes a great national triumph (which is, however, not historical). Three late paraphrases of the book have come down to us, the second of which gives another list of riddles, together with an account of how the Queen came to visit Solomon. After an extraordinarily confused history of the foreign monarchs who had oppressed Israel, the writer turns to David and then to Solomon (of whom also he had previously spoken), to whom God had given dominion over all beasts, birds, reptiles, demons, and spirits, and he knew the speech of all these. On a certain day when his heart was warmed by wine, he made a great feast, invited all the neighboring kings of the East and the West, had music on all sorts of instruments, and ordered all the beasts and demons to be brought, in order that the kings might see his greatness. All these came except the moorcock, whom the angry king was about to put to death. The bird, however, excused himself by saying that for three months he had been flying over the earth, without food or drink, to see if there was any land that did not acknowledge the king's authority — he had come on a land in the East abounding in gold and silver, with trees as old as the creation and watered from the Garden of Eden, its inhabitants ignorant of war, and ruled over by a woman whose name was the Queen of Sheba, and, he added, if the king desired, he would bring the rulers of that land in fetters and lay them at his feet. The king approved, a letter was written, and the bird, attended by the other birds, departed with the letter attached

to his wing. When he reached Sheba, the Queen had just gone to the shore of the sea to perform her devotions — looking up she sees the sun obscured by the host of birds and is astounded — the bird descends, she sees the letter and reads (in substance): “King Solomon greets you and your nobles. Know that God has given me authority over beasts, etc., and all kings send me greeting. If you will do likewise I will confer great honor on you — if not, I will send an army and destroy you.” The Queen decided that it would be wise to obey. She sent costly presents, with a letter saying that, though the journey from Sheba ordinarily took seven years, yet, on account of the questions she wished to ask, she would come in three years. She came accordingly, had a splendid reception, and put her test questions. First riddle: A wooden well with iron buckets that draw up stones and pour out water. The answer is: the tube of antimony (kohl), used by women to blacken their eyebrows; the “stones” are the chalk contained in the antimony mixture; the “buckets” are the needles with which the mixture is applied to the eyebrows. Second riddle: As dust it comes forth from the ground, its food is dust of the earth, it is poured out like water, and it illumines the house. Answer: naphtha. Third riddle: A piper passes over its head and it utters a loud and bitter cry, its head is like a reed, it is honor for the rich, disgrace for the poor, honor for the dead, disgrace for the living, joy to birds, trouble for fishes. Answer: flax — the wind pipes over the flax-stalks, linen furnishes garments of varying value to different classes of men, from flax are made shelters for birds, nets for fishes. These seem to be poor things to take a three-years’ journey for; one might expect more serious questions to be assigned to an intellectually eager woman and a wise man; but these riddles are the tattle of story-tellers.

The Midrash and the Targum give only a portion of the fancies that gathered about the Biblical story. It was from North Arabian Jews that Mohammed got most of what he knew of the Queen; but the account in the Koran differs in some details from that in the Targum: Solomon sends the messenger bird, not on the occasion of a feast, but while he was on a journey and had come to the Valley of Ants — it is stated in later books that the bird was summoned to find water for the army, and its absence was thus discovered; and further, Solomon tests the discernment of the Queen by sending for her throne, which was brought in the twinkling of an eye and altered, and when she was asked if it was hers, she discreetly replied that it looked like hers.

Both the Targum and the Koran have the curious statement that the Queen had hairy legs. Solomon received her in a glass house the floor of which was of glass, and she, imagining that it was water, lifted her skirts; thereupon the king, according to the Jewish account, remarked that hair on the legs (literally, feet), while an ornament to a man, was unseemly for a woman; in the Koran he simply observes that the

palace was of glass, thus delicately calling her attention to her error of judgment. The later Moslem writers interpreted this physical peculiarity as showing that she was of jinn descent; they constructed a romantic history of her father's marriage to a jinn maiden, and of her skill in ridding herself and the land of a tyrant who wished to make her his wife by violence; her treatment of him was just Judith's treatment of Holofernes. The hirsute feature accepted, it was natural for the Moslems to attribute it to a partially non-human parentage; but it is not clear why the Jews so represented her — perhaps they fancied that, as she came from a strange and mysterious land, there must be something strange in her. In the Targum account, however, Solomon observes that she is beautiful. A more important addition in the Koran is that she was converted to Islam by the exhibition of the king's magnificence and wisdom — she and her people had been worshippers of the sun. This latter statement is correct: the word of a sun-god (Arabic *Shams*) was common over a great part of Arabia. As to her conversion, this is part of Mohammed's habit of representing all great and good persons of ancient times (as Abraham, David, Solomon, Alexander) as Moslems.

The later Moslem writers expand the whole story of the visit with great wealth of incident and with their usual charm of narration, but add little of importance. Only, Solomon is credited with chicanery in his effort to keep up his reputation for wisdom. The Queen sends him a box the contents of which he is asked to tell without opening it; his clairvoyance is at fault, but the angel Gabriel informs him that it contains two pearls, one unpierced, the other pierced tortuously, and he is required to pierce the one and to run a thread through the other. He inquires of men and jinn how to do it, but they do not know; then he turns to the satans, who refer him to the borer worm, and the worm solves the problem. Again the satans come to the rescue, when the Queen asks him concerning water that comes neither from earth nor from heaven; the water is sweat from a running horse. This unfairness is represented as merit in Solomon, because it shows that he had super-human aid, just as in the old Greek and the old Christian romances the hero slays the dragon by magical means, yet is no less a hero.

In some of the later Moslem stories the Queen (who is called *Balkis* or *Bilkis*) becomes the wife of Solomon, and their son is supposed to succeed to her throne. It is possible that this marriage formed a part of the legend in Yemen in pre-Mohammedan times (though it is not mentioned in the Koran) and came to the knowledge of the Christian Ethiopians (Abessinians) when they conquered and put an end to the Sabean state in the sixth century of our era. It does not appear that the Meccans knew much of Saba at that time; the later Moslem historians seem to be ignorant of its history pertaining to the period before the Mohammedan conquest in the seventh century, and the Koran has no

historical notice of the region except a legendary reference to an invasion of Meccan territory by the Ethiopian King Abraha (Sura 105). It is quite possible, therefore, that legendary material existing among Jews and Christians in Yemen was unknown to Mohammed. A colony from Southern Arabia settled in Ethiopia some time before the beginning of our era, and may there have come into contact with Jews; perhaps it was there that the Ethiopians heard the story of the Queen of Sheba. However that may be, the legend of the marriage was adopted by the Abessinians, and their kings from an early time have held themselves to be descended from the famous queen — to her every king, including the present sovereign, Menilek II, carries up his genealogy. In the creed of the people she lives as no less historical than Solomon himself.

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